

The Shadow of the Sun:
Tracing Wagner During the First Year of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Introduction

'If a soldier is at risk of being taken prisoner... and [is] unable to fight the enemy, then he blows himself up... [with the] cherished grenade which is given to every soldier of the PMC Wagner. That's how they call it: "the last grenade."' – Evgeniy Prigozhin, founder of Wagner.¹

On 24 February 2022 tanks rolled under the cover of moonlight as mechanised artillery split the sky once again over European soil. That evening Russian president, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, shattered international norms when he announced that the Russian Federation was to undertake a '*spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya*' (special military operation) against Ukraine.² This operation was, according to Putin, a necessary condition to rid Ukraine of neo-Nazis that actively poisoned Ukrainian society. In actuality, the operation saw the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) commit a full-scale invasion of Ukraine under dubious pretense. For many, this step was a logical continuation of Putin's increasingly aggressive foreign policy. For others, this was an unforeseeable and unforgiveable decision made in desperation by Putin to prevent Ukraine from fully integrating with Western economic and security institutions.

The war, at the time of writing, has just surpassed the year mark and neither the Russians nor the Ukrainians (with the assistance of the Western community) have dealt a definitive blow against each other. Thousands have lost their lives and there appears to be no end in sight. This war, unlike so many before, is actively unfolding in-front of our eyes as combatants and civilians on both sides eagerly upload images and videos of their wartime experiences to publicly available websites. Yet in a war of many firsts, one scenario stands out as particularly important

¹ *Orkestr Vagnera* | Wagner, post in Оркестр Вагнера | Wagner channel, *Telegram*, 14 October 2022, https://t.me/orchestra_w.

² "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, web, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> (accessed 9 March 2023).

for the future of warfare: Russia's utilization of a private military company (PMC) to achieve its military goals.

PMCs can broadly be understood as companies which perform operational and tactical support during military operations. In other words, PMCs are organized to perpetrate collective violence for a paying customer.³ They differ from a government's traditional armed forces, most notably, because these groups often act for personal gain and profits where a traditional military does not.⁴ PMCs, though comprised of individually motivated mercenaries, are legitimate private companies with an established hierarchical structure which provide a set of services to willing customers that happen within the context of warfare.⁵ PMCs may train state and non-state forces, collect, and analyze intelligence, offer protective services to private and state-owned sites, and conduct propaganda, disinformation, and information operations.⁶

One of Russia's PMCs, *ChVK Wagner* (PMC Wagner or Wagner Group), has emerged from the conflict as the primary PMC active in the Ukrainian conflict. This paper will provide a description of Wagner's actions in Ukraine between 24 February 2022 and 24 February 2023 by conducting an open-source analysis of Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels and holding these findings up to the expectations set for PMCs by the existing literature. This paper, in doing so, will further contribute to our understanding of PMCs and how they may be used in contemporary warfare.

³ Alex Alvarez, 'Militias and Genocide' *War Crimes, Genocide, & Crimes against Humanity* 2 (2006): 2-3

⁴ Alex Alvarez, 'Militias and Genocide,' pp. 2-3.

⁵ The term "mercenary" has become pejorative in the modern era and its use has become less useful for describing foreign-born militants operating in a country as mercenaries have become increasingly associated with individuals who felt as though they could not integrate into civil society and chose to fight as it was their only option, rather than being motivated by financial gain. See, Kevin A O'Brien, "What should and what should not be regulated?" in *From Mercenaries to Markets*, ed. Simon Chesterman & Chia Lehnardt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 33-35.

⁶ Asymmetric Warfare Group, *Russian Private Military Companies: Their Use and How to Consider Them in Operations, Competition, and Conflict* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, 2020): 4.

This paper is organized into 4 sections: *Section I* will provide background information about PMCs, the emergence of Wagner, and how Wagner became an extension of Russian foreign policy. *Section II* will discuss the existing literature relevant to PMCs and provide the methodology that I utilize for my analysis. In *Section III* I introduce my findings. This section will describe how Wagner has been used in Russia's invasion of Ukraine both on the offensive and defensive front. Finally, *Section IV* will then hold my findings up against the existing literature to determine if Wagner follows the expected trajectory of a PMC which will then be followed by the conclusion of this paper.

This paper finds that Wagner's actions during the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine often deviate from the expectations set for PMCs by the existing literature – especially on the offensive front. Some critics of this analysis may argue that a year is not a long enough period to determine outliers and that examining these actions while the war unfolds is making assumptions too early; however, as I will demonstrate, Wagner's actions deviate in such a way within the first year of the war that they already challenge the existing assumptions about PMCs and scholars and policymakers alike should take note of how quickly a PMC can alter its methods once deployed.

I: Background

“The Wagner PMC is funded by the money made from selling the tears and misery of Western Democracies.” – Evgeniy Prigozhin⁷

⁷ Prigozhin's sarcastic response to a journalist's question about where Wagner receives its funding. See, *Кепка Пригожина*, post in the Кепка Пригожина channel, *Telegram*, 22 November 2022, https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat.

The mercenary vocation is not a new phenomenon. Empires and states throughout history have contracted non-state (often foreign) entities to conduct military operations.⁸ However, the broader mercenary tradition began to dwindle and was largely marginalized by the end of the nineteenth century.⁹ This can likely be attributed to the growing legitimation of the nation-state, the preference of governments to utilize state institutions to conduct violence when necessary, and the delegitimization of certain warfare practices at the end of the Second World War. The mercenary vocation was subsequently specialized and were hired as ad-hoc supplementary forces to be used for conducting specific and limited operations.¹⁰

The Emergence of the PMC

Capitalist economic forces outlasted the Soviet Union, and their victory brought an end to the Cold War. The domination of capitalist principals provided those who wished to supply security services privately with a new opportunity to sell their products legitimately. These new opportunities would coincide with an evolution in technology and this evolution would make it easier for private citizens to broadcast the actions of a uniformed government agent if they utilized illegal or illegitimate tactics. Governments who sought to pursue more dubious policy objectives or who simply wished to maintain a certain degree of secrecy while maintaining their legitimacy would have to look for other options.

⁸ P. W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 19.

⁹ Alan Axelrod, *Mercenaries: A Guide to Private Armies and Private Military Companies* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2014), 183.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 183.

The private military firm, a corporate body which specializes in the provision of military skills, would come to serve as an acceptable alternative.¹¹ Several different types of security provisioners would emerge – most notably those who specialize in defense, known primarily as private security companies (PSC), and the more operationally flexible private military companies.¹² PMCs are structured loosely and, in many ways, exhibit more fluid and dynamic social arrangements when compared to a PSC or a traditional military force.¹³

The United States, in its conduct of two simultaneous wars, faced difficulties related to manpower and establishing a local presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. One scholar notes, “the needs of U.S. administrators... in the war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, permissive post-invasion legal environment in combination with developments in communication and organizational technologies led to the extensive use of private contractors to perform security duties that would otherwise be performed by uniformed military personnel.”¹⁴ The U.S. bureaucracy came to heavily rely on proxies in the form of private military contractors and allied regimes as a result.¹⁵

These private contractors came in the form of highly specialized, private armed forces who had integrated themselves into the capitalistic economic system by corporatizing their skills. This corporatization of the mercenary vocation forced potential members to further specialize their services and demonstrate their value as a security-providing commodity. These companies would come to specialize in a variety of operations. Alan Axelrod, in his study of the history of private militaries and private military companies, notes that:

¹¹ P. W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, pp. 6.

¹² Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019): 183; Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 1.

¹³ Alex Alvarez, ‘Militias and Genocide’ *War Crimes, Genocide, & Crimes against Humanity* 2 (2006): 2-3.

¹⁴ Simon Frankel Pratt, *Normative Transformation and the War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 4.

¹⁵ Simon Frankel Pratt, *Normative Transformation and the War on Terror*, pp. 6

“[PMCs] tended to specialize in services and products for discretely defined segments of the military marketplace. Some focused on operations (as operation providers), some on consultation (as consulting providers), others on logistics and training (as logistical and training providers; some offered intelligence and surveillance services (as intelligence providers), and others performed security and antiterrorism functions (as security and antiterrorism providers.”¹⁶

Today, because of this wide scope of operational capabilities and specializations, demand for PMCs has increased to the point where there is now a vibrant PMC industry which caters to a wide array of clients.¹⁷ This proliferation of PMCs has raised important policy questions regarding the conduct of PMCs as member of groups such as the U.S.-based Blackwater PMC have been convicted of war crimes.¹⁸ Policy makers, as a result, attempted to establish a legal framework for PMC operations; However, Article. 47 of the 1977 Protocol (I) Additional to the Geneva Conventions regarding the protection of victims of armed conflict does not extend to PMCs.¹⁹ This means that PMCs are not expected to be held to the same legal standard that traditional armed forces would face. This likely incentivises actors who are seeking dubious policy objectives to hire a PMC to conduct these operations.

The U.S., despite the controversies that would come to surround PMCs like Blackwater, provided the pretext for other states to hire private actors to conduct warfare operations.²⁰ The evolution and establishment of a PMC market that other states could access would emerge as a result. It should be noted, however, that no other country would come to rival the U.S.’ deep

¹⁶ Alan Axelrod, *Mercenaries: A Guide to Private Armies and Private Military Companies*, pp. 183.

¹⁷ Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDA, *The Montreaux Document: On pertinent international legal obligations and good practices for States related to operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict*, International Montreaux: Committee of the Red Cross, 2008, pp.5, web, https://www.icrc.org/en/download/file/135841/montreux_document_en.pdf (accessed 13 March 2023).

¹⁸ Though those convicted were later pardoned by U.S. President Donald Trump, see “US pardons for Blackwater guards an “affront to justice” – UN experts,” *The United Nations*, 2020, web, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/12/us-pardons-blackwater-guards-affront-justice-un-experts>, accessed 13 March 2023; For a discussion of Blackwater and its controversies, see Michael Welch, “Fragmented power and state-corporate killings: a critique of Blackwater in Iraq,” *Crime Law Soc Change*, vol.51 (2009) and Peter W. Singer, “The Dark Truth about Blackwater,” *Brookings*, web, 2007, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-dark-truth-about-blackwater/>, accessed 11 March 2023.

¹⁹ Anna Maria Dyrer, “The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy,” *The Polish Institute of International Affairs* 2018, web, https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy.

²⁰ Simon Frankel Pratt, *Normative Transformation and the War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 5.

integration of PMCs into its government structures until the Russian government began to increase its reliance on PMCs.²¹

The Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and contemporary Russian state have an established history of using private companies and entrepreneurs to provide site security, train foreign forces, and conduct combat operations. For example, the Russian Empire utilized the Ukrainian Cossacks to defend its borders, the Soviet Union utilized foreign volunteers to fight in overseas wars and the post-Soviet Russian environment saw a notable proliferation of private security companies in the 1990s.²² Political Scientist Kimberly Marten argues that Putin has maintained this tradition and even expanded the Russian government's reliance on informal security organizations like PMCs.²³

Russia's increased reliance on PMCs may not, on the surface, appear to be anything extraordinary – it coincides with the proliferation of PMCs across the globe and the Russian government simply appears to have acted as other countries have; However, Russia has yet to make PMCs legal (Russia did not sign the Montreaux Document) while simultaneously using private armed organizations to pursue its foreign policy objectives.

²¹ Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric McQueen, and Joe Moye, *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021): 1.

²² Seth G. Jones et. al, *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies*, pp. 14; see Åse G. Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, *Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies: The Implications for European and Norwegian Security* (Oslo, Norway: Defence Research Establishment, September 11, 2018), <https://www.emi.no/publications/6637-russian-use-of-private-military-and-security>; and Bukkvoll and Østensen, "The Emergence of Russian Private Military Companies," 1–17; Hege Toje, "Cossack Identity in the New Russia: Kuban Cossack Revival and Local Politics," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 7 (2006): 1057–1077, doi:10.1080/09668130600926306; Shane O'Rourke, "Cossacks," in *The Encyclopedia of War*, edited by Gordon Martel (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Mark Galeotti, "The Cossacks: A Cross-Border Complication to Post Soviet-Eurasia," *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 55–60, <https://www.dur.ac.uk/ibru/publications/view/?id=68>; and Marcel V. Van Herpen, *The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); O'Rourke, "Cossacks."; Østensen and Bukkvoll, *Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies*; and Olivia Allison, "Informal But Diverse: The Market for Exported Force from Russia and Ukraine," in Molly Dunigan and *The Markets for Force: Privatization of Security Across World Regions*, edited by Ulrich Petersohn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015): 87–102.

²³ Kimberly Marten, "Semi-State Security Actors and Russian Aggression," *Lawfare blog*, web, 8 July 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/semi-state-actors-and-russian-aggression>

Russian PMCs, despite their legal status, would come to fill a number of roles: some operate like the Western counterparts, such as RSB group; others serve as a proxy for the Russian MoD, like *CHVK Patriot* (PMC Patriot); and others still appear to simultaneously serve the interest of the state and private Russian individuals who are closely connected to the state, such as the Wagner Group which has been closely associated with the Russian caterer and Oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin – a fact he denied up until September 2022.²⁴

Prigozhin owes his political relevancy to the fact that Putin raised his status up from a street merchant, ex-criminal to the Kremlin’s caterer. From here he ingratiated himself with Putin to the point that he was given permission (only Putin could make this decision) to quietly recruit private fighters to help achieve Russia’s objectives in eastern Ukraine.²⁵

Euromaidan & Wagner’s Origins

Ukrainian civilians took to the streets in late November 2013 to protest their President Viktor Yanukovich following his decision to abandon the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement in favour of a deal that was offered to him from the Russian government. This protest, now known as the EuroMaidan protests, would culminate with Yanukovich fleeing the

²⁴ Seth G. Jones et. al, *Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies*, pp. 1; Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019): 182; Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, “Private military companies – Russian great power politics on the cheap?” *Small Wars & Insurgences* 33, no. 1-2 (2022): 133; Aleksander Stephanov, “Igry Patriota – Minoborony Taino Sozdalo Chastnuiu Voennuiu Komaniyu?” *Nasha Versiya* 16 July 2018. Nathaniel Reynolds, “Putin’s Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2019, web, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>, accessed 11 March 2023; *Kepka Prigozhina*, post in the Kepka Пригожина channel, *Telegram*, 26 September 2022, https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat!; Pjotr Sauer, “Putin ally Yevgeniy Prigozhin admits founding Wagner mercenary group,” *The Guardian*, web, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/26/putin-ally-yevgeniy-prigozhin-admits-founding-wagner-mercenary-group>, accessed 9 March 2022.

²⁵ Charles Maynes, “Yevgeniy Prigozhin, ‘Putin’s Chef,’ has emerged from the shadows with his Wagner Group,” *NPR*, 2023, web, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/06/1160851615/russia-putin-chef-yevgeniy-prigozhin-wagner-group>, accessed 15 March 2023.

country on 22 February 2014.²⁶ That same day, Ukrainian legislators reached a quorum in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's Parliament), and the representatives present voted to remove Yanukovich from his position and to install an interim government. The Russian government claimed that these events were effectively a *coup d'état* against Yanukovich and did not recognize the interim government as legitimate.²⁷

The Russian government then moved to protect their interests in Ukraine by mobilizing a disinformation campaign that would culminate in violent anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Ukraine's Donbas region.²⁸ Moreover, Moscow employed a group of unmarked operators to enter and gain control of the Crimean Peninsula as well as foment discontent in the Donbas region – it would later be revealed that this group was a combination of Russian special forces and individuals that would come to make up the Wagner Group.²⁹

Behind the scenes, Russia's 2008 military modernization project had downsized a large portion of its military and an abundance of operatives with combat experience from Chechnya, Georgia, and other locations, were left with few opportunities to better their economic situation.³⁰ These operatives would first find opportunities with the *slavyanskiy korpus* (Slavic Corps) PMC. The Slavonic Corps were originally hired to protect oilfields in the Syrian Deir-ez-Zor region but there is little evidence to suggest that this group coordinated with the Russian

²⁶ Alan Taylor, "Ukraine's President Voted Out, Flees Kiev," *The Atlantic*, 2014, web, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/02/ukraines-president-voted-out-flees-kyiv/100686/>, accessed 11 March 2023.

²⁷ Marie-Louise Gumuchian, Kellie Morgan, and Matthew Chance, "Demonstrators rally as Crimea crisis mounts," *CNN*, 2014, web, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/09/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/>, accessed 13 March 2023.

²⁸ Disinformation can broadly be understood as all forms of false or inaccurate information that is designed and promoted to intentionally cause public harm, see High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Disinformation, "A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent high level group on fake news and online disinformation," *European Commission*, 2018, web, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6ef4df8b-4cea-11e8-bd1d-01aa75ed71a1>, accessed 29 March 2023.

²⁹ Daniel Brown, '3 Countries where Russia's shadowy Wagner Group mercenaries are known to operate,' *Business Insider* 2018, web, <https://www.businessinsider.in/politics/3-countries-where-russias-shadowy-wagner-group-mercenaries-are-known-to-operate/articleshow/63943117.cms>.

³⁰ Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Russian Surrogate Warfare in Ukraine and Syria: Understanding the Utility of Militias and Private Military Companies," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 4 (2021): 555.

government as several of its operatives were sentenced to several years in prison for their mercenary activities.³¹ One Slavonic Corps operative, however, would become vital to the establishment of Wagner.

Dmitry Utkin, a former reserve colonel of the *Glavnoje upravlenije General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation [GRU]), had participated in the Slavonic Corps and at some point between 2013-2014, established contact with Prigozhin. Prigozhin and Utkin, who allegedly takes his call sign 'Wagner' from Richard Wagner because of Adolf Hitler's admiration for the composer, would come to form the group which shares the name.³²

The Wagner Group would establish itself in 2014 by fighting alongside the Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine.³³ Here Wagner would work alongside other PMCs, notably *Yedinye narodnyye obshchinnyye tovarishchestva [E.N.O.T]* (the United People's Communal Partnerships), to improve the capabilities of the Ukrainian rebel groups in Donbas. Additionally, Wagner conducted aggressive disinformation campaigns through Prigozhin-owned media entities where they would attempt to ferment discontent and promote pro-Russian narratives in the region.³⁴

Scholars pointing to the suspicious and swift rise of Wagner, including the group's ties to the state vis-à-vis Prigozhin and the group's hazy financial backing, have argued that the group can be understood as "a clandestine collection of businesses with close ties to the Russian

³¹ Emmanuel Dreyfus, "Russian Military Companies. Wagner, How Many Divisions?" *OrientXXI*, 2022, web, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/russian-military-companies-wagner-how-many-divisions.3828>, accessed 11 March 2023.

³² Because of Dmitry Utkin's callsign "Wagner," which he allegedly used because of the composer's popularity amongst Adolf Hitler. See, "Vladimir's army," *The Economist* Vol. 443, Iss. 9291, (2022): 53-54.

³³ Daniel Brown, '3 Counties where Russia's shadowy Wagner Group mercenaries are known to operate,'

³⁴ Seth G. Jones et. al, *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies*, pp.17; also see Avromov, "Gray Zone Adventurers," 77; Matthews, "Putin's (Secret) Army," 31, 33; Interfax - Ukraine, "Hrytsak: SBU Uncovers Involvement of Russian 'Wagner PMC' in Destroying Il-76 in Donbas, Debaltseve Events," *Kyiv Post*, October 7, 2017, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/hrytsak-sbu-uncovers-involvement-russian-wagner-pmc-destroying-il-76-donbas-debaltseve-events.html>.

government – including financial facilitators, cut-outs, front companies, and shell companies to hide activities and investments.”³⁵ Some suggest that the group is actively equipped and supported by the Russian Defense Ministry (hereafter MoD) and the GRU – though events discussed below problematize this theory.³⁶

As the conflict in the Donbas region shifted from Wagner personnel to local militants who had been trained by the group in 2015, Wagner’s leaders began to look for opportunities outside of Ukraine. It was convenient for Wagner that the Russian government had also begun to search for new areas to expand its influence. An opportunity for these interests to converge would present itself in the form of the Syrian civil war.

Wagner as a Tool for Russian Foreign Policy

Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric Mcqueen, and Joe Moye, in their analysis of Wagner’s genesis and tactics, argue that the Russian government began to rely more on PMCs (primarily Wagner) as a tool for achieving foreign policy objectives at the same time it became involved in the Syrian Civil War in 2015.³⁷ Moreover, scholars argue the way Russia used Wagner in Syria would increasingly deviate from the standard behaviours a state would be expected to exhibit when using a PMC abroad.³⁸ This means that as the Russian government

³⁵ Seth G. Jones et. al, *Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies*, pp. 1.

³⁶ Aleksander Gostev, ‘Russia’s Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge from the Shadows,’ *Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications*. 2016, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1849418470?parentSessionId=T0gwqghbuwHjt7KJQ%2FjosQUFEfj8GIaO2d42WQ73YUA%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=14771>, accessed 10 May 2021.

³⁷ As noted above, the Slavonic Corps were active in Syria prior to Wagner but there is little evidence to suggest that they were utilized by the government, Emmanuel Dreyfus, “Russian Military Companies. Wagner, How Many Divisions?” *OrientXXI*, 2022, web, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/russian-military-companies-wagner-how-many-divisions,3828>, accessed 11 March 2023; Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric Mcqueen, and Joe Moye, *Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021): 1.

³⁸ For a discussion about Russia’s unique utilization of Wagner, see Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019): 182.

increasingly relied on Wagner to pursue goals, so too would the government test and employ novel tactics through the group.

The Syrian Civil War, which saw embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad struggle to overcome a variety of rebel forces throughout Syria, presented the Russian government and Wagner with a prime opportunity to test the group's capabilities as they would simultaneously fight organized Syrian rebels as well as the terrorist insurgency conducted by Daesh.³⁹ Assad formally requested Russian assistance in September 2015.⁴⁰

Moscow primarily utilized its superior air power to battle the Syrian resistance, having conducted an estimated 39,000 single-aircraft bombing missions but the Russian government also employed Wagner to conduct several ground-based operations – Wagner allegedly played an important role in the capture of Palmyra in May of 2016.⁴¹ Wagner was also notably involved in an altercation in 2018 (almost two years after Putin announced that most of Russia's forces would leave Syria due to successfully accomplishing their mission) with American troops in the Deir ez-Zor province.⁴² A number of Wagner operatives were killed during this altercation and the Russian high command in Syria denied any involvement in the incident despite recognizing the death of four Russian citizens.⁴³

³⁹ Also known as the Islamic State (IS), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). I have employed the term Daesh (the group's Arabic acronym) as there is no formally recognized Islamic State of Syria, Iraq, nor the Levant. Moreover, I believe that the IS, ISIL, and ISIS titles are an appropriation that misrepresent the Islamic faith. See, Faisal Irshaid, "Isis, Isil, IS or Daesh? One group, many names," *BBC News*, web, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27994277>, accessed 13 March 2023.

⁴⁰ Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Russian Surrogate Warfare in Ukraine and Syria: Understanding the Utility of Militias and Private Military Companies," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 4 (2021): 554.

⁴¹ A. Gostev and R. Coalson, "Russia's Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge from the Shadows," *RFE/RL*, web, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-paramilitary-mercenaries-emerge-from-the-shadows-syria-ukraine/28180321.html>.

⁴² Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Russian Surrogate Warfare in Ukraine and Syria: Understanding the Utility of Militias and Private Military Companies," pp. 554.

⁴³ Ivan Nechepurenko, Neil MacFarquhar, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Dozens of Russians Are Believed Killed in U.S.-Backed Syria Attack," *The New York Times*, 13 February 2018, web, <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/world/europe/russia-syria-dead.html?action=click&contentCollection=Opinion&module=Trending&version=Full®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article>.

Wagner's experiences in Ukraine and Syria have bolstered the group's combat abilities as well as its reputation and have allowed for the group to expand in terms of operational sophistication and ability as well as in the number of countries that they operate in. Wagner has been hired to protect transmission infrastructure and hydrocarbon production facilities in North Africa, they operate in the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, and Sudan where the group often provides a variety of services which can include direct regime support, combat operations, protective services, personnel training, site security, information operations, and the promotion of pro-Moscow propaganda.⁴⁴

It should be noted that Wagner does not work for just any client. They operate in countries where the Russian state, Russian business, and/or Russia's allies have a vested interest.⁴⁵ Russia has pursued these interests through Wagner while categorically denying its use of any PMC in any capacity. Indeed, Moscow, up to the 2022 invasion, denied the presence of Russian troops in eastern Ukraine despite overwhelming evidence to suggest that Russian troops had participated in the fighting and helped train the pro-Russian militias of the Donbas region. Moreover, the Wagner Group had been proven to active in the region having conducted assassination of pro-Russian commanders who were deemed not loyal enough to Moscow.⁴⁶

II: Review & Methodology

⁴⁴ Anna Maria Dyer, 'The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy, *The Polish Institute of International Affairs* 2018, web, https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy; Daniel Brown, '3 Countries where Russia's shadowy Wagner Group mercenaries are known to operate,' *Business Insider* 2018, web, <https://www.businessinsider.in/politics/3-countries-where-russias-shadowy-wagner-group-mercenaries-are-known-to-operate/articleshow/63943117.cms>; Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric McQueen, and Joe Moye, *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021): 1.

⁴⁵ Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019): 183.

⁴⁶ V. Maximov, "Putin's Secret Armies Waged War in Syria – Where Will They Fight Next?," *Newsweek*, web, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/2018/01/26/putin-secret-army-waged-war-syria-782762.html>; Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Russian Surrogate Warfare in Ukraine and Syria: Understanding the Utility of Militias and Private Military Companies," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 4 (2021): 553.

Why would a modern state turn to a PMC to conduct its military operations? For what purpose do scholars suggest the Russian government is using Wagner? This section explores how the existing literature answers these questions. I then close this section with a description of my sources and methods, their limitations, and how I attempted to overcome them.

I have determined three key explanations for why governments use PMCs in the existing literature. These three explanations are not comprehensive and do not capture every unique scenario for which a state would employ a PMC; however, these three explanations are frequently and consistently provided by scholars, analysts, and journalists alike when they attempt to explain the proliferation of PMCs both in and outside of Russia. These three explanations are: (1) PMCs are relatively cheap force multipliers that can further state goals in a combat scenario, (2) PMCs can engage in ‘gray area’ operations in which the state can plausibly deny its involvement in the conduct of the organization, and (3) PMCs can further enrich the political elite as they can be used to gain access to rare materials via security contracts with resource-rich or otherwise wealthy clientele.

Affordable Force Multipliers

The most important function of a PMC is its ability to enhance the capabilities of a client’s military force so that it may conduct (or deter) combat operations more effectively.⁴⁷ It is an expensive and time-consuming pursuit to create and maintain a competent military force.

⁴⁷ David Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Interventions* (London: Routledge, 1998): 22; Emmanuel Karagiannis, “Russian Surrogate Warfare in Ukraine and Syria: Understanding the Utility of Militias and Private Military Companies,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 4 (2021): 550.

PMCs, conversely, require fewer resources and are easier to maintain.⁴⁸ Moreover, PMCs tend to employ veterans and military experts who do not require basic training. This expertise helps PMCs address whatever shortcomings a traditional armed force may have and augments the strength of the client as a result.⁴⁹

PMCs can also be used to concentrate on a particular operation that will subsequently free up personnel in other forces for other operations.⁵⁰ Because PMCs can operate at all levels of combat, including as battalion tactical groups with portable air-defense systems, anti-tank guided missiles, unmanned aerial systems, and other weapon systems, PMCs can be utilized in any capacity.⁵¹

PMC groups require, as noted above, fewer resources to conduct large-scale operations meaning that a state client can expand its influence at a significantly lower cost than it would with its traditional forces – the group’s private financiers will have covered an operative’s salary, training (if necessary), insurance, and other benefits.⁵² In other words, a state can pursue military objectives on someone else’s dollar or at least through finances that are kept off the record.

Importantly, PMCs engage in kinetic (physical) operations and serve as force multipliers which can also function as proxies for missions that skirt the rules of warfare. PMC operatives can effectively serve as grey zone operators who help the state avoid formal attribution while still sending a message.⁵³

Grey Area Tactics & Plausible Deniability

⁴⁸ Alex Alvarez, 'Militias and Genocide,' pp. 21-22.

⁴⁹ Alex Alvarez, 'Militias and Genocide,' pp. 21-22; Anna Maria Dyner, 'The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy,' *The Polish Institute of International Affairs* 2018, web, https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy.

⁵⁰ Alex Alvarez, 'Militias and Genocide,' pp. 21-22.

⁵¹ Asymmetric Warfare Group, *Russian Private Military Companies: Their Use and How to*

Consider Them in Operations, Competition, and Conflict (Baltimore: John Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, 2020): 59-60

⁵² Seth G. Jones et. al, *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies*, pp. 16-17; 1.

⁵³ Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Private military companies – Russian great power politics on the cheap?" *Small Wars & Insurgences* 33, no. 1-2 (2022): 134.

A rational state actor must calculate how their actions will be perceived both domestically and internationally. In her examination of the Chinese state's reliance on hiring private citizens to utilize violence to achieve politically unpopular policies, Lynnette Ong argues that the Chinese government avoids responsibility through third party actors. These actors may exhibit undisciplined violence which results in excess casualties which then incentivises state actors to distance themselves from the non-state agent(s) so that the state cannot be overtly connected to the agents' illegitimate use of violence.⁵⁴ This same logic can be attributed to a state's use of a PMC.

The most consistent, and often most compelling, argument for why states use PMCs outside of their obvious combat-related benefits relates to state leadership's ability to plausibly deny their involvement where PMCs are used.⁵⁵ PMCs blur the distinction between military and non-military operatives and offer the state plausible deniability should these PMCs exceed the accepted level of violence for an operation or violate international law. Should a PMC operative choose to take such an action, the government is likely to maintain its legitimacy as it is difficult to prove that the operative's actions were directed by the state. PMCs may or may not actively pursue state policy goals but the relationship between the government and a PMC is difficult to establish – especially in an authoritarian administration like Russia's.

The military forces of a country are an overt, official, and recognizable representative of the state. Government officials, as a result, have become increasingly aware that they may be

⁵⁴ Lynnette H. Ong, *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): 3-4.

⁵⁵ Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Private military companies – Russian great power politics on the cheap?" *Small Wars & Insurgences* 33, no. 1-2 (2022): 134; Andrew Linder, 'Russian Private Military Companies in Syria and Beyond,' *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 2018, web, <https://www.csis.org/npfp/russian-private-military-companies-syria-and-beyond>; Alex Alvarez, 'Militias and Genocide,' pp. 18.

held accountable for the actions of their country's military when it pursues questionable or dubious policy objectives.⁵⁶ PMCs, in contrast, do not exhibit the same obvious connection between the state and its operatives. A PMC may be headquartered in a country, but it does not necessarily represent the interests of that country.

For the Russian context, Political Scientist Mark Galeotti argues that Russia's use of PMCs ties into the Russian concept of *gibridnaya voina* (hybrid warfare). The term hybrid warfare is contested amongst scholars but what is important for the purposes of this paper is that, according to Galeotti, the Russian concept of hybrid warfare necessitates, among other things, the use of plausibly deniable assets.⁵⁷ The Russian leadership needs deniable assets to achieve its often dubious goals – PMCs offer a lower profile than active-duty Russian troops and contractors are two or three steps removed from the Russian government who finances them through various subsidiary and shell companies.⁵⁸

A second notable theory describing why Russia (and other countries) might use a PMC is related to casualty aversion. Societies which are casualty averse are less likely to support military interventions and an increasing number of casualties is likely to facilitate unrest in such a society.⁵⁹ It is possible that the notion of casualty aversion can be included in the concept of plausible deniability as the hiring government does not have to disclose a PMC's casualties as they are not, technically, responsible for them.

⁵⁶ Alex Alvarez, "Militias and Genocide", pp. 17.

⁵⁷ Mark Galeotti, "Hybrid War or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right," *Mayak Intelligence*, Prague (2016): 58-59; For an examination of some of the theories about hybrid warfare, see: Frank Hoffman, "Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Warfare," *Strategic Forum* no. 240 (2009); Alex Deep, "Hybrid Warfare: Old Concept, New Techniques," *Small Wars Journal*, web, 2015, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/hybrid-war-old-concept-new-techniques>.

⁵⁸ Seth G. Jones et. al, *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies*, pp. 16.

⁵⁹ For a discussion about casualty aversion, see Charles K. Hyde, "Casualty aversion," *Aerospace Power Journal* 14, no. 2, (2000): 17-27.

Russian society has grown increasingly casualty-averse and that the Kremlin has had to factor the Russian public's perceptions into its conduct of war and how it disseminates information about casualties. The Russian government, then, is afforded the opportunity to pursue riskier combat operations while maintaining an acceptable degree of separation between it and what scholars call the 'body bag' syndrome.⁶⁰

The Enrichment of the Elite

An important but underutilized argument in the literature relates to how a successful PMC may act as a vehicle to enrich any member of the political elite who are attached to the company. PMCs often provide security to resource rich clients and these clients are often more than willing to exchange some of these resources for protection.⁶¹ This may then result in the PMC lining the pockets of the political, economic, and military elite attached to the group.⁶²

Wagner has several operations in resource-rich countries and could establish an arrangement with host clients to exchange their services for access to these resources. Moreover, the countries that Wagner operates within often exhibit some form of structural insecurity and Wagner could use this to its advantage in order to rain insecure and unaligned mining companies – like they did on the border of Sudan and the Central African Republic in June 2022.⁶³

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Russian Surrogate Warfare in Ukraine and Syria: Understanding the Utility of Militias and Private Military Companies," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 4 (2021): 555; Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric McQueen, and Joe Moye, *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021): 16; Molly Dunigan, *Victory for Hire: Private Security Companies' Impact on Military Effectiveness* (Redwood City: Stanford Security Studies, 2011); and Bukkvoll and Østensen, "The Emergence of Russian Private Military Companies."

⁶¹ Philip Everts, "When the Going Gets Rough: Does the Public Support the Use of Military Force?" *World Affairs* 162, no. 3 (2000): 93.

⁶² Kimberly Marten, "The GRU, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Russia's Wagner Group: Malign Russian Actors and Possible U.S. Responses," *Hearing committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy and the Environment United States House of Representatives*, 7 July 2020; Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Private military companies – Russian great power politics on the cheap?" *Small Wars & Insurgences* 33, no. 1-2 (2022): 131.

⁶³ Jason Burke and Mohammed Salih, "Russian mercenaries accused of deadly attacks on mines on Sudan-CAR border," *The Guardian*, 2022, web, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/21/russian-mercenaries-accused-of-deadly-attacks-on-mines-on-sudan-car-border>.

The literature discussed above portray some of the complex and multifaceted factors that might motivate a contemporary state to hire a PMC. Notably, we should expect that a PMC working in conjunction with traditional forces operate as a flexible, supplementary force which conduct a number of battlefield operations. The connection between the state leadership and a PMC should be blurry and one's ability to determine who directed the actions of a PMC should be limited at best. Finally, we should see the enrichment of any private individual proven to be connected to a PMC. This could be an enrichment in material wealth and/or in political relevancy.

Sources and Methods

My primary sources were derived from the social media network Telegram. Telegram is a cloud-based messaging application that can be accessed via any device that can connect to an internet browser. Telegram supports a function known as Channels in which authors can, instead of sending private messages to users, post information in a single space in which up to 200,000 users can read and interact with.⁶⁴ Users can upload photos, videos, and files of a variety of file types for no cost. Channels do not require any verification process to be created, though certain people of influence may have an icon which indicates that they have been verified.⁶⁵

The data collected for this paper was conducted via a search in Telegram's search function which allows users to seek out specific words used in a chat. The words 'вагнер' (Wagner) and 'музиканты' (musicians) were the key words I searched for. I searched for "музиканты" because the term became synonymous with the group given that they share their

⁶⁴ "Channels: Broadcasting Done Right," *Telegram*, web, telegram.org/blog/channels, 25 September 2015.

⁶⁵ For instance, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Telegram has a 'verified' icon. See Zelenskyy / Official, *Telegram*, https://t.me/V_Zelenskiy_official.

name with the nineteenth-century German composer, Richard Wagner. I examined over 2700 individual messages posted by Wagner-affiliated, pro-Russian, and pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels to conduct my analysis. Because Russian is not my native language, I also ran each individual message through an artificial intelligence-based online translation tool to ensure consistency and accuracy in my translation of the messages. The program is used is DeepL Translator which posits a translation accuracy level three times more reliable than other translation tools available on the internet.⁶⁶

The analysis conducted in this paper is qualitative. I conduct an open-source data analysis. Open-source analysis mines data from ‘large, incoherent sources [and] allows analysts to build up detailed composite overviews of their targets.’⁶⁷ The overview reached by the data accumulated in this research then serves as the core of this paper and allows me to describe the actions of Wagner in Ukraine. This type of methodology has commonly been used by government counterterrorist units to locate and track terrorist organizations.⁶⁸

Limitations

Research about an ongoing war must remain adaptable to the context of the war and how it is carried out. It is not likely that the motivations behind Russia’s utilization of Wagner remain the same now as they did at the beginning of the war. This makes it difficult to establish a theoretical framework for PMCs that can be applied to the future of this war or any potential future wars. The goal of this paper, however, is not to provide such a framework nor do I intend to prescribe any outcome of the war. Instead, I utilize a descriptive methodology that helps us shape our understanding of *how* PMCs *can* be used in contemporary warfare and then hold my

⁶⁶ “Why DeepL?,” *DeepL Translator*, web, <https://www.deepl.com/whydeepl/>.

⁶⁷ Uffe Kock Wiil, “Counterterrorism and Open Source Intelligence: Models, Tools, Techniques, and Case Studies,” in *Counter Terrorism and Open Source Intelligence* (Springer Vienna, 2011): 1.

⁶⁸ See, Uffe Kock Wiil, *Counter Terrorism and Open Source Intelligence* (Springer Vienna, 2011).

findings up to the existing literature to see if Wagner's actions are consistent with some of the previous theories about PMC conduct and utilization.

My use of Telegram is a novel approach with a few drawbacks. Legitimacy and reliability are, by far, the most difficult issues to overcome – how can we be sure that the posts in these chats accurately depict what Wagner is doing in Ukraine? How reliable are the sources providing the posted information? Indeed, several chat threads that I had used were eventually flagged as fraudulent accounts that were posing as though they were affiliated to Wagner and were taking donations to 'help' the PMC from their readers.⁶⁹ I have attempted to overcome this hurdle by triangulating the data amongst several channels. Moreover, the primary channels that I utilized were named by Evgeniy Prigozhin himself.⁷⁰

While the channels often read as an echo chamber of pro-Russian sentiment, there is a surprising amount of correction between the channels where some reports (such as the capture of a village) are refuted by a channel and the channel who erroneously reported will revise their message. Moreover, I have relied on detailed and otherwise reliable investigative journalism to trust that the channels I am reviewing are related to Wagner.⁷¹ This triangulation of data across several Telegram channels as well as from reliable news reports is, I argue, enough to overcome some of the verification issues apparent in my methodology.

Some may take issue with my use of a translation tool to ensure accuracy as these tools cannot always capture the context of a sentence and do not always provide a reliable translation. My response to this concern would state that I used the tool to supplement my own translation of

⁶⁹ I have omitted the data from these channels.

⁷⁰ Prigozhin notes that *rybar*, REVERSE SIDE OF THE MEDAL, *Voyenkor Kotenok Z* are not directly affiliated to his company – though *rybar* was previously listed on his RIA FAN website. He also notes that the data they use is not *always* verified. See, *Kepka Prigozhina*, post in the *Кепка Пригожина* channel, *Telegram*, 16 November 2022, https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat.

⁷¹ See, Anna Mierzynska, 'Kanał na Telegramie wskazuje, co ma zbombardować rosyjska armia. Zabójcza wojna informacyjna Kremla,' *OKO.press*, web, 2022, <https://oko.press/sobota-kanal-na-telegramie-wskazuje-co-ma-zbombardowac-rosyjska-armia-zabojcza-wojna-informacyjna-kremla>, translated by DeepL Translator.

a message rather than rely on the tool as my only source for translation. Moreover, I have omitted messages that remained unclear from my analysis. Finally, my triangulation of several channels posting various analyses of the same event(s) has allowed for me to extract the context of each post.

I argue that the information derived from this paper far outweighs the concerns or critiques that may be associated with the paper's sources and/or methodology. Even if my data were deemed inaccurate, the messaging conveyed by these channels – what they want the public to see – is incredibly useful for future research regarding the relationship between PMCs, the Wagner Group, and propaganda.

III: Wagner's Role after Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

“As for the ‘musicians’ of the PMC Wagner, we have already received the country’s highest award. This is an opportunity to play our own music for the glory of Russian weapons.”- Evgeniy Prigozhin⁷²

We should expect that Wagner, if the group's behaviour follows the arguments made in the literature discussed above, operates in conjunction with the RAF – their targets may be different, but the desired outcome should be the same. Moreover, these operations should be supplementary to the RAF and not independent of it. The group's ties to the state, according to the literature, should remain “murky” despite operational success or failure.⁷³ Finally, the

⁷² *Кепка Prigozhina*, post in the Кепка Пригожина channel, 15 January 2023, *Telegram*, https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat

⁷³ “Powerful ‘Putin’s chef Prigozhin cooks up murky deals,” *BBC News*, 2019, web, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50264747>, accessed 15 March 2019.

literature informs us that Evgeniy Prigozhin should remain relatively distanced from the group while simultaneously enjoying a boost in his personal wealth and prestige.

However, as will be demonstrated, Wagner's operations in Ukraine suggest that the organization does not follow the theoretical path laid before them: Wagner acts independently of the RAF (and oftentimes without their assistance entirely) and Putin, Prigozhin, and Russian leaders in general have increasingly acknowledged the existence and success of Wagner. The most accurate theory deals with the rise of the elite through a PMC's success as is the Prigozhin's personal stock has skyrocketed in Russian society – even then, Prigozhin has shifted from denying his involvement with the group to affirming that he created it during the course of this war and it appears that he may be using Wagner as a tool to create an independent powerbase outside of the traditional Russian military structure.

Wagner on the Offensive

Wagner has played an (increasingly) important role for Russia's offensive in Ukraine even though the group, throughout the first year of the war, has only been noticeably active in the Donbas region of Ukraine. This runs contrary to early reports which claimed that Wagner was hired to carry out the assassination of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Andriy Yermek, and Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal.⁷⁴ There are few signs, at the time of writing, to suggest that Wagner was active in regions where evidence of human rights abuses against Ukrainian civilians have been prevalent, such as Bucha and Irpin, though it is important to note that the villages captured by Wagner have

⁷⁴ Valentina Romanenko, 'Intelligence: Russians still trying to kill the leadership of Ukraine; new militants arrive,' *Ukrainian Truth* 2022: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/03/20/7332998/>, last modified 10 May 2022.

yet to be recaptured by Ukrainian forces.⁷⁵ This runs contrary to both scholarly and non-scholarly assumptions that a PMC is more likely to commit atrocities because of its murky legal status.⁷⁶

The Wagner group has demonstrated consistency and reliability in their operations – where the Russian forces enjoyed notable gains early in the war (and suffered significant setbacks to a Ukrainian counteroffensive), Wagner fighters have methodically inched their way on the battlefield. The PMC utilizes sophisticated tactics that could easily rival a traditional military configuration: they have used assault, artillery, reconnaissance, heavy vehicle, drone, and air-based units in their operations. The group utilizes slow and concise urban warfare tactics which tends to rely on close-quarter fire fights supported by Wagner artillery forces.

In the Donbas, the group has yet to attempt to overwhelm the Ukrainian forces with sheer numbers. Instead, Wagner utilizes small assault units (typically no bigger than 10 individuals), rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) weaponry, and drones to conduct most of their offensive operations. They combine these methods with real-time intelligence provided to them by their reconnaissance units.⁷⁷ These units may or may not be supported by Wagner, Ukrainian separatist, or RAF artillery.⁷⁸ These tactics suggest that Wagner operatives are highly trained and

⁷⁵ It should be noted that unverified evidence of an atrocity has come from the village of Popasna, but the presence of Luhansk People's Republic and Chechen forces during its capture make the attribution of this incident to any one group difficult. See, Luke Harding, "Footage appears to show fresh atrocity against Ukrainian PoW," *The Guardian*, web, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/06/footage-appears-show-head-ukrainian-pow-stuck-pole>. For a general discussion about the alleged atrocities committed by Russian forces, see Mansur Mirovalev, "Bucha killings: 'The world cannot be tricked anymore,'" *Aljazeera*, 2022, web, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/4/will-the-bucha-massacre-wake-up-the-world> (accessed 7 March 2023); Amanda Macias, "Russia has committed more than 65,000 war crimes in Ukraine, prosecutor general says," *CNBC*, 2023, web, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/02/01/ukraine-russia-war-65000-war-crimes-committed-prosecutor-general-says.html> (accessed 7 March 2023).

⁷⁶ Alex Alvarez, "Militias and Genocide" *War Crimes, Genocide, & Crimes against Humanity* 2 (2006): 2-3.

⁷⁷ GREY ZONE, message posted in the GREY ZONE channel, *Telegram*, 24 January 2023, web, https://t.me/grey_zone; no information has been made available for the size of Wagner's reconnaissance units.

⁷⁸ This is even though Prigozhin frequently alleges that Wagner works exclusively on their own. Videos and posts in the various chats contradict this information. For Prigozhin's claims, see Colonelcassad, message post in Colonelcassad channel, *Telegram*, 13 October 2022, https://t.me/boris_rozhin; For contradictions to his claim, see *Rybar'*, message post in the Рыбарь channel, *Telegram*, 08 June 2022, <https://t.me/rybar>; *Voyenkor Kotenok Z*, message post in the Военкор Котенок Z channel, *Telegram*, 15 June 2022, <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok>; *Khokhly Plenyye Trupy Ishchi*, message post in ХОХЛЫ ПЛЕННЫЕ ТРУПЫ ИШЧИ channel, *Telegram*, 30 September 2022, <https://t.me/colonelcassadd>.

specialized forces which are utilized for operations that are best suited for the operative's skillset.

In terms of offensive battlefield strategy, the Wagner group originally appeared to overwhelm a city's defenses with assault units effectively forming a line that would push through a city. These units will then move building-to-building to capture or eliminate enemy combatants in what the Telegram channels often referred to as *zachistka* (mop-up or sweep-up) operations.⁷⁹ Wagner utilized this strategy in its capture of Popasna, Lysychansk, Sievierdonetsk, and Soledar. Wagner's tactics, however, appear to change roughly around the time that Ukraine's counteroffensive in Kherson and Kharkiv begins to find success and when the group begins to introduce convicts taken from the Russian prison system in exchange for their freedom after their service to the battlefield.

Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate how Wagner shifted its strategy from charging into a village and conducting building-to-building assault operations (Figure 1) to slowly encircling the city before capturing it (Figure 2). Discussing the potential causal mechanisms behind

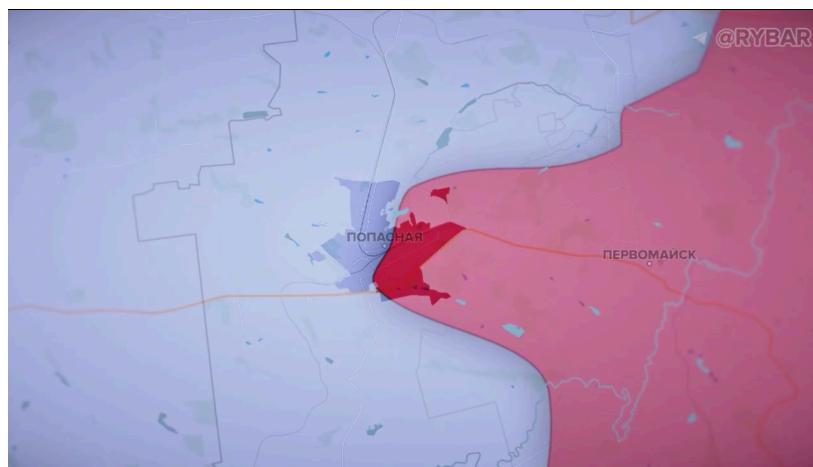


Figure 1: Wagner Assault on Popasna, May 2022⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Кепка Prigozhina, post in the Кепка Пригожина channel, 31 October 2022, *Telegram*, https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat

⁸⁰ *Voynkor Kotenok Z*, message post in the *Военкор Котенок Z* channel, *Telegram*, 3 May 2022, <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok>.

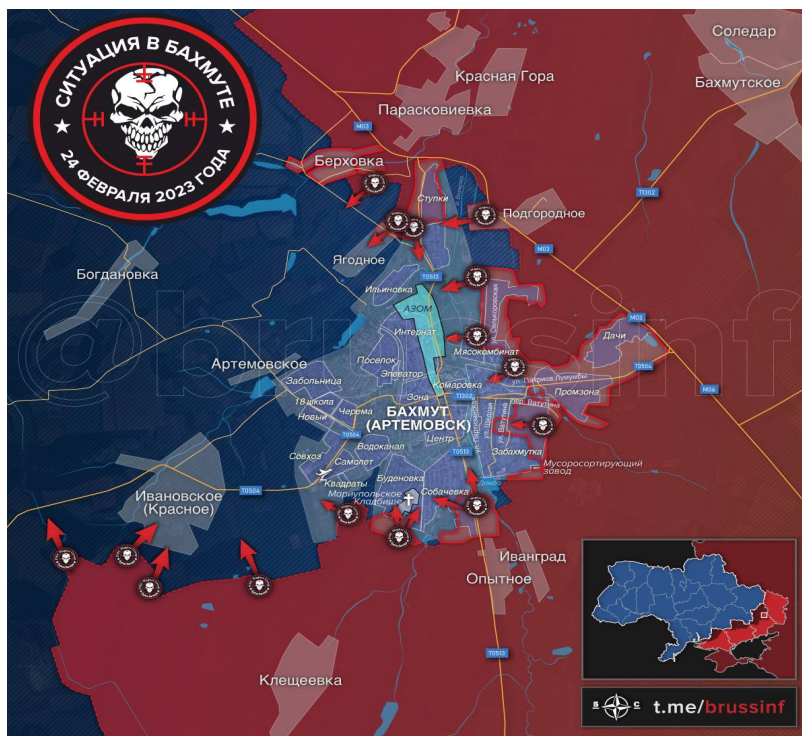


Figure 2: Wagner's position in Bakhmut, February 2023⁸¹

the decision to shift tactics reaches beyond the intent of this paper but what is important is to note is that Evgeniy Prigozhin acknowledged this encirclement strategy and claimed that its goal was not to capture Bakhmut but to eliminate as much Ukrainian resistance as possible.⁸² The capture of villages and cities now seem to be secondary to simply enacting defeat upon Ukrainian forces. This is best demonstrated by the 'Bakhmut Meatgrinder' strategy.

This strategy saw both Wagner and Ukrainian bodies become fodder as the group shifted from an intentional strategy to capture a city to a strategy that sought to eliminate as many enemy combatants as possible. This is not to suggest that Wagner does not desire to capture Bakhmut, instead, this strategy can be understood as a deliberate attempt to methodically

⁸¹ "Colonelcassad," *Telegram*, 24 February 2023, Web, https://t.me/boris_rozhin.

⁸² *Voyenkor Kotenok Z*, message post in the *Военкор Котенок Z* channel, *Telegram*, 25 November 2022, <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok>.

eradicate Ukrainian defences while simultaneously generating opportunities for the RAF in other combat zones as Ukrainian reinforcements are pulled to defend the city.

Wagner at Home and on the Defence

Wagner’s defensive actions are more concurrent with the expectations that the existing literature established for PMCs and the group appears to be primarily concerned with supplementing the RAF’s war effort on the defensive end rather than pursuing their own goals. However, some of Wagner’s tactics can also be read as subversive tactics to prepare Russians who are currently non-combatants for combat.

Wagner is actively conducting training missions for civilians in some of Russia’s regions which border Ukraine – most notably the Kursk and Belgorod regions – for the event that Ukrainian troops enter Russia’s territory.⁸³ Wagner fighters train “people’s militias” in how to employ tactical medicine, grenade throwing, anti-tank tactics, and provide individuals with engineering training.⁸⁴ This means that Wagner is actively training Russian civilians how to engage in combat under the guise of a Ukrainian threat; however, should the Russian government choose to fully mobilize its population, Wagner could crucially save the government time and money through these efforts.

Wagner combat engineers have also been instrumental in establishing what has colloquially been referred to as the ‘Wagner Line.’ The line, pictured in Figure 3, is a deep trench that is foregrounded by anti-tank equipment and is intended to provide the RAF with a

⁸³ *Orkestr Vagnera* | Wagner, post in Оркестр Вагнера | Wagner channel, *Telegram*, 25 December 2022, https://t.me/orchestra_w.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 9 December 2022.

meaningful defensive position within the Donbas. The line, at the time of writing, is still under construction



Figure 3: The ‘Wagner Line’⁸⁵

but the plans suggest that it will spread northwards from Svitlodars’k until the south of Kreminna and will then spread southeast past the city of Luhansk until it reaches the Russian border. This defensive line clearly demonstrates how interwoven the objectives of the Wagner Group and the RAF can be as this line could: A) provide both forces with a pre-approved and more easily defensible line should they opt to retreat, and B) facilitate a line of demilitarization if the Ukrainian and Russian government establish this outcome as a legitimate solution to the conflict.

Discussion

⁸⁵ “GREY ZONE,” *Telegram*, 20 October 2022, web, https://t.me/grey_zone.

Wagner’s offensive actions, when held up to the existing literature about PMCs, appear to deviate from several assumptions both about the Wagner group itself and from PMCs in general. The group has outperformed the RAF, they stepped out from the shadows to cultivate a mythology about their actions, and Evgeniy Prigozhin, despite his close relationship with Putin, has emerged as an increasingly important political actor who could threaten the regime following the end of Putin’s reign.

Outperforming the RAF – The ‘Bakhmut Meatgrinder’

The most notable finding in this analysis of Wagner’s activities in Ukraine is that the PMC has consistently outperformed the Russian Armed Forces on an operational level. Indeed, often when the RAF would retreat – especially during the Ukraine’s successful counteroffensive in Fall 2022 – the Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels would be swift to remind readers that Wagner moved forward when no one else did.⁸⁶ The Wagner Group, instead of simply supplementing RAF operations, have emerged as a viable second prong for Russia’s assault. This is perhaps best demonstrated in Wagner’s assault on the city of Bakhmut.

Wagner entered the Bakhmut region on 4 August 2022.⁸⁷ The group has not, as of the first anniversary of the war, captured Bakhmut. Instead, the group shifted from a forward moving tidal wave to a war of attrition. Wagner’s slowdown, given the trajectory of its prior successes, suggest both a more advanced Ukrainian defense and a shift in Wagner’s tactics. Indeed, Wagner’s continued success on the battlefield despite the RAF’s drawbacks has likely caused

⁸⁶ Оркестр Вагнера | Wagner, post in “Оркестр Вагнера | Wagner” channel, *Telegram*, 15 November 2022, web, https://t.me/orchestra_w.

⁸⁷ The channels refer to the city as Bakhmut and its Soviet name, “Artemivsk,” interchangeably. Colonelcassad, “Colonelcassad” message post, *Telegram*, 4 August 2022, web, https://t.me/boris_rozhin.

embarrassment for the MoD as a private military force was outperforming the country's armed forces. Tensions between Prigozhin and the military establishment came to the forefront when Prigozhin accused the MoD of “stealing” a victory from Wagner in the town of Soledar.⁸⁸ These tensions would reach their climax at the end of my analysis with Prigozhin accusing the MoD of purposely withholding ammunition from Wagner – which this paper explores in greater detail in the following subsection.

Despite the rising tensions between Prigozhin and the MoD, Wagner continues to conduct successful, if limited, operations around Bakhmut. The PMC has forced the Ukrainian Armed Forces to redistribute their reservists to the Bakhmut front. This movement of personnel potentially provides the RAF to pursue strategic goals elsewhere in Ukraine. Its successes have simultaneously boosted the prestige of Wagner and incentivized Wagner's fighters (and Prigozhin himself) to step from behind the curtain of uncertainty and plausible deniability.

Out of the Shadows: Wagner as Mythmaker

The most crucial blow to Wagner's secrecy came on 26 September 2022 when Prigozhin finally admitted to his role in the creation of the Wagner group in May 2014.⁸⁹ No longer could the Russian government, most notably Putin himself, plausibly deny its connection to Wagner as Prigozhin's relationship to the Russian president had been well documented.⁹⁰ Indeed, the

⁸⁸ Though it should also be noted that the MoD updated their claim after Prigozhin's complaint took off. See, REVERSE SIDE OF THE MEDAL, post in “REVERSE SIDE OF THE MEDAL” channel, *Telegram*, 13 January 2023, <https://t.me/rsotmdivision>; Reuters, “Russia's Prigozhin Talks Up Wagner Role Amid Rivalry With Defense Ministry,” *Voa News*, 2023, web, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-s-prigozhin-talks-up-wagner-role-amid-rivalry-with-defense-ministry-/6918625.html>, accessed 14 March 2023.

⁸⁹ *Кепка Prigozhina*, post in the Кепка Пригожина channel, *Telegram*, 26 September 2022, https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat1; Also, Pjotr Sauer, “Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin admits founding Wagner mercenary group,” *The Guardian*, web, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/26/putin-ally-yevgeny-prigozhin-admits-founding-wagner-mercenary-group>, accessed 9 March 2022.

⁹⁰ “Powerful ‘Putin’s chef Prigozhin cooks up murky deals,” *BBC News*, 2019, web, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50264747>, accessed 15 March 2019; The Associated Press, “Putin-linked business man admits to US election meddling,” *AP*

linkages between Wagner and Putin’s instruction become increasingly apparent after Prigozhin’s confession as Putin would come to pardon Russian convicts so that they can join the Wagner group – a strategy that conveniently adds fodder to Wagner’s ‘meatgrinder’ and helps Putin avoid full mobilization.⁹¹ Wagner’s increasing public presence, however, is not limited to the role of Prigozhin and Putin.

Wagner’s successes, despite the RAF’s ongoing issues, have cultivated an image that depicts a hyper-masculine, heterosexual, Orthodox Christian, stoic, and mythic band of heroic fighters who are more reliable and more successful than the traditional armed forces. As the myth of the Wagner group continues to grow, the veil of secrecy between Wagner and its actions becomes increasingly transparent. Wagner’s growing transparency is also evident in the use of a sledgehammer as a symbol. The hammer, which grew in popularity after two videos depicting the extrajudicial execution of apparent Wagner defectors, has been used by Wagner members and Prigozhin himself as a symbol of Wagner’s ability to break defenses and smash their opponents.⁹²

The Wagner Group appears to be relatively adept at utilizing symbols to evoke their image, bravado, and military prowess. Wagner soldiers are frequently referred to as *muzykanty* (musicians) by both members of the group itself and their onlookers. Moreover, Wagner members and their supporters call their operations *orkestry* (orchestras) or *kontserty* (concerts) and they suggest that when they work abroad that they are *na gastrolyakh* (on tour). Many of the images posted by the Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels utilize the symbology behind the

News, 2022, web, <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-business-social-media-7fefa7ab0491b653f6094a4d090155fe>, accessed 15 March 2023.

⁹¹ Max Sneddon, “Russia admits Vladimir Putin pardoning convicts so they can join Wagner in Ukraine,” *The Financial Times*, 2023, web, <https://www.ft.com/content/82748bdd-5b34-4204-b3ad-d08da2c58982>, accessed 14 March 2023.

⁹² The videos of the executions were shared a number of times in each of the chats I analyzed. For a discussion related to the incidents see, Dan Ladden-Hall, “Wagner Group Release ANOTHER Sledgehammer Execution Video,” *the Daily Beast*, 2023, web, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/wagner-group-release-another-sledgehammer-execution-video>, accessed 29 March 2023.

musician – such as the fixing of a violin to the front of a Wagner transportation vehicle or Wagner members posing with guitars and other instruments for group photos while in the field.

Posts relating to Wagner's recruitment often refers to the group's hypermasculine image and frequently depicts how the group has remained successful despite the RAF's failings. They also note how their fighters, unlike the members of the RAF,⁹³ enjoy consistent and reliable payment in addition to several other benefits: recruits receive three weeks of training, a monthly salary of 240 thousand rubles, life and health insurance, free overalls and relevant equipment, and room and board. Wagner seeks recruits that are ideally 22-55 years old with previous military service not being a requirement. Importantly to the image of the group, Wagner does not allow recruits that have contracted HIV/AIDS (likely due to the exaggerated and stereotypical association of this disease to the homosexual community),⁹⁴ hepatitis C, or asthma.⁹⁵

While the connections between the Russian government and Wagner can no longer realistically be denied, Wagner does still help the Russian leadership avoid a 'body-bag' issue. They do not report their casualties, nor do they appear, at the time of writing, to report unsuccessful missions. However, Wagner operatives (and Prigozhin himself) near the end of my analysis, began to appeal to Russian leaders on Telegram for weapons and ammunition, claiming that Wagner casualties could have been halved if they were provided with ammunition from the Russian MoD.⁹⁶ These appeals show Wagner's clear relationship with the Russian MoD and highlight how the PMC will weaponize their casualties to motivate the Russian government to act.

⁹³ For a discussion about the RAF's payment issues, see Sophia Ankel, "100 Drafted Russian soldiers went on strike, refusing to fight in Ukraine after not getting paid, report says," *Business Insider*, 2022, web, <https://www.businessinsider.com/drafted-russia-soldiers-on-strike-after-not-getting-paid-report-2022-11>, accessed 14 March 2023.

⁹⁴ Several posts utilized pejorative slang when referring to those that the author(s) would associate with the disease.

⁹⁵ "GREY ZONE," *Telegram*, 30 November 2022, web, https://t.me/grey_zone.

⁹⁶ *Кепка Пригожина*, post in the *Кепка Пригожина* channel, *Telegram*, 17 February 2023, https://t.me/Prigozhin_hatl;

Prigozhin's Rising Star

Yevgeniy Prigozhin's relevance in Russian domestic politics has skyrocketed during the first year of the invasion.⁹⁷ Moreover, his status (and likely protection) derived from Wagner has allowed him to make critical remarks about the RAF with minor repercussions.⁹⁸ His efforts to visit troops, recruit Russian prisoners under the guise of moral redemption, don military garb and participate in bombing missions by Wagner pilots, and his commentary about the war has been frequently celebrated in the pro-Russian/pro-Wagner Telegram channels.

Prigozhin has utilized his rising star to grow Wagner's public profile with the opening of a new headquarters and technology centre in St. Petersburg – despite Russia's law that outlaws the PMC.⁹⁹ Prigozhin's rise has run in contrast to the failures of the RAF which has earned him the scorn of the Russian MoD. It is possible that Prigozhin is attempting to prolong his political influence through expanding his personal prestige alongside Wagner's successes. He can turn to Wagner's successes and utilize these structures to cement his relevancy beyond the end of the war or Putin's reign.

Russia's potential for long-term stability following the end of this war or the end of Putin's regime – whichever happens first – is not guaranteed. Prigozhin has augmented his image and has now the potential to emerge as a powerful leader in a post-Putin Russia. Whether the post-Putin government is stable or not, it is likely that they will have to deal with Prigozhin (if he does not throw himself into the mix on his own).

⁹⁷ Michael Safi and Pjotr Sauer, hosts, "How Putin's chef became the second-most powerful man in Russia," *The Guardian* (podcast) 31 January 2023, accessed 15 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2023/jan/31/putin-chef-russia-yevgeny-prigozhin-wagner-podcast>; Charles Maynes, "Yevgeniy Prigozhin, 'Putin's Chef,' has emerged from the shadows with his Wagner Group,"

⁹⁸ Charles Maynes, "Yevgeniy Prigozhin, 'Putin's Chef,' has emerged from the shadows with his Wagner Group."

⁹⁹ "Wagner Mercenary Group Opens Tech Center in St. Petersburg," *The Moscow Times*, 2022, web, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/11/04/wagner-mercenary-group-opens-tech-center-in-st-petersburg-a79286>, accessed 15 March 2022.

IV: Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how Wagner's actions in the first year of Ukraine deviate from the existing literature and posits that Yevgeniy Prigozhin will remain an important political figure in contemporary Russia as a result (unless he is eliminated by his competition). The group has become the most reliable military force for the Russian offensive, the ability to plausibly deny the group's connections to the upper echelon of the Russian government has been shattered, and Prigozhin's political star has risen at an exponential rate.

This paper has also demonstrated the value of open-source analysis when researching an event which is actively unfolding. Future researchers should explore the value of this methodology and explore how the types of channels examined in this analysis portray themselves. Moreover, future research could examine Ukrainian voices which also utilize these communication features: to what degree are there resistance channels that are just as active and informative as the channels relating to Wagner and the RAF?

The Russian assault in the first year of the war has generally been portrayed as a disaster. The RAF made swift gains early on but, when faced with an organized Ukrainian counteroffensive armed with western weapons, swiftly retreated. The Wagner group, on the other hand, has achieved consistent success on the battlefield. This success has, contrary to the expectations set for PMCs by prior scholarship, made Wagner a second force in Russia's assault and not simply a supplementary one. Moreover, Russian leaders have increasingly closed the temporal distance between Wagner's actions and the Russian government – though no action would be as clear as Prigozhin's admission to creating the group. Given Wagner's successes, it is likely that PMCs will continue to be utilized by states to achieve foreign policy goals.

Researchers and policymakers must strive to understand how PMCs operate so we can establish meaningful ways to combat them.

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